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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES  
AMBASSADOR TO AFGHANISTAN

¶1. (SBU) We warmly welcome your visit to Afghanistan. Your timing could not be better. You are coming at a crucial period in Afghanistan's movement toward a more secure and democratic society. The presidential election campaign has just begun, as has our increase in military forces, plus a dramatically large uplift of civilian personnel. The government and the public here have welcomed the United States' new strategic purpose: strengthen security, build access to justice and broader governance capacity at both the national and local levels, and develop the economy. The number of U.S. civilians working in a range of disciplines throughout Afghanistan will be significant, with concentration in the most sensitive Southern and Eastern regions. The most immediate political objective, which we share with the Afghans and our Coalition partners, is to ensure the legitimacy and transparency of the August 20 presidential and provincial council elections.

Elections  
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¶2. (SBU) The August elections influence nearly everything political here. Some 40 are running in the presidential race, and June 16 the official campaign season began. President Karzai holds a significant advantage over his nearest competitors: ex-Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, ex-Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, and Deputy Speaker of the Lower House Mirwais Yaseni. In the end, only those three of the half-dozen rumored top-tier challengers registered, alongside relatively obscure running mates, signaling a lack of broad-based support for their campaigns among Afghanistan's political powerbrokers. Other registered candidates of note include two women who are as unknown nationally as the other candidates. Karzai, who has received endorsements from nearly every major political, ethnic, mujahideen, and religious leader in Afghanistan, is confident that he will win re-election. He may not, however, be able to win 50% of the vote on August 20, and thus be forced into a runoff in early October.

¶3. (SBU) Sensing the popular mood, Karzai and opposition candidates alike claim to welcome international support for a level playing field and free and transparent elections. The Independent Election Commission (IEC), with strong international backing and technical support from UNDP, the United States, and other major donors, has worked to foster at least theoretical opportunity for real competition. The IEC and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) have issued statements expressing standards of conduct for the campaign and spelling out government officials' duty of impartiality.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador launched on June 20 his public engagement with opposition presidential candidates, to counter the widely held perception of U.S. backing for President Karzai's reelection. He met and conducted press conferences on successive days with the three major opposition candidates: Ghani on June 20, Abdullah on June 21 and Yaseni on June 22. At each event, the Ambassador told

journalists he wanted to demonstrate US impartiality and commitment to credible, secure, and inclusive elections. The US neither supported nor opposed any one presidential candidate. Moreover, this year's election was an opportunity for Afghan voters to give the government a "report card" on its past five years, and for candidates to vigorously debate the issues and offer solutions to problems that most concern Afghans. We believe these public events are turning public perceptions. We suspect President Karzai was behind a phone call from Foreign Minister Spanta to the Ambassador on June 22, following the Abdullah press event, to protest what he characterized as U.S. interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The Ambassador disputed the point, pointing out that he was invited to each event, and that he simply reiterated President Obama's statement on U.S. impartiality.

¶5. (SBU) We are also doing more operationally to ensure credible, secure and inclusive elections. The U.S. mission will be facilitating air transportation for the most viable candidates; assuring access to media over and above what the IEC required; running additional polling; and coordinating international observers. We are stepping up our own voter education work with women, youth, media, and other civil society groups, soon to be adding an extra \$700,000 in State Department democracy program funding. In May, President Karzai issued a presidential decree on non-interference in the election process, in response to pressure from us and the international community to pass a Hatch Act-like regulation. We are urging the government to finalize a media law strengthening protections for freedom of expression, including in political campaigns.

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#### Human Rights Work Ahead

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¶6. (SBU) A thin but outspoken stratum of Afghan society increasingly is giving voice to a desire for positive political reform and social change -- reflecting the outlooks of an extremely young demographic in this conservative society. Nonetheless, other aspects of Afghanistan's human rights record remain poor, including violence and discrimination against women, lack of due process and weak rule of law, and intimidation restricting the exercise of free speech. In the face of powerful conservative religious and tribal patriarchal traditions, the Afghan government has shown a lack of sustained will to press forward a systematic campaign to promote and protect human rights, particularly women's rights.

¶7. (SBU) We are looking to your trip as an important tool to highlight the plight of and the progress achieved by Afghan women, and to reaffirm to all Afghans that women's rights specifically and human rights more generally are key elements of our policy focus here. One of the public affairs centerpieces of your visit will be your announcement of a three-year, \$27 million grants program to support gender equality in Afghanistan. The Ambassador's program will strengthen Afghan-led civil society organizations by providing technical assistance and small grants to Afghan NGOs. This target group has traditionally been underserved. This infusion of new resources, and technical assistance to use the resources soundly, will fill a gaping need here.

¶8. (SBU) We, and others, are tracking two high profile freedom of religious expression cases. In October 2008, the Afghan Supreme Court upheld a local court's conviction and 20-year prison sentence for student Sayed Pervez Kambakhsh, for distributing an article over the internet about women's rights that allegedly defamed Islam. The international community is pushing for a presidential pardon, and we would ask you to do the same with Karzai. Also, Ghows Zalmai and Mullah Qari Mushtaq are challenging their 20-year sentences, handed down by a Kabul Appeals Court in February, for publishing and distributing a Dari translation of the Koran that did not include the original Arabic text - an act

considered sacrilegious by extremely doctrinaire Muslims.

¶9. (SBU) Following the initial firestorm in response to President Karzai signing a Shia Family Law in March, civil society actors pushed for a review and amendment process inclusive of women and civil society. To date, however, the MOJ review process has been internal and the outcome is difficult to predict, although a finished product is unlikely before the August election. Civil society activists and the Ministry of Women's Affairs drafted a progressive domestic violence bill, also under review by the MOJ. We speak regularly with Justice Minister Danesh to assure the outcome of the process will be consistent with the constitution and Afghanistan's international treaty obligations, particularly as they pertain to women's rights.

#### Complex Security Situation

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¶10. (SBU) GEN Stanley McChrystal assumed command of USFOR-A and ISAF on June 14 and reorganization of the command structure is proceeding apace. GEN McChrystal faces a security situation in Afghanistan of sharply increasing violence over the last two years. Attacks in the last weeks (about 400 per week) are at their highest levels since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, in part because the Coalition is going after insurgent sanctuaries and safe haven. GEN McChrystal has announced that reducing civilian casualties--an issue which undermines Afghan popular and government backing for all we do--is a major priority as he pursues the necessary military effort to provide a secure environment for strengthening Afghanistan's society and government and for implementing the growing civilian programs designed for those ends. American and other contributing nation troops continue to steadily increase for the longer COIN fight, and for the immediate task of giving the Afghan populace adequate security for the August 20 elections. U.S. forces are expected to top 68,000 in 2010; there are approximately 32,000 non-U.S. international forces in Afghanistan. The quality and size of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is also rising. Current levels about 90,000 Afghan army personnel and about 83,000 Afghan police. The Afghan army is growing by more than 2,500 personnel per month and should reach 134,000 in 2011. Vigorous reform programs are underway to reduce corruption, especially in the ANP.

#### Developing Governance Abilities

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¶11. (SBU) Karzai's state and government suffer from inability

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to deliver essential services, compounded by endemic corruption, political intimidation, poverty, criminality, insurgency and ethno-tribal politics, all exacerbated by three decades of war and misrule since the Russian invasion of 1979. Electoral dynamics are further complicating the problem, leading Karzai to make expedient decisions on one hand, but also to appoint top-flight leaders like Minister Atmar to deliver police services. Nonetheless, rapid transformation is underway in Afghanistan and there is much to work with. Atmar is only one among a solid group of impressively capable and clean technocratic leaders. What the state and civil society lack in broad institutional capacity is offset by the striking dedication, energy and patriotism of many Afghans, including many who have returned from comfortable lives abroad to rebuild their country. The energy and ambition of Afghan youth are particularly striking at the burgeoning university campuses.

¶12. (U) In order to accelerate improved responsiveness in Afghan institutions and local capacity, our new strategy requires an increase in the U.S. civilian presence alongside the increases in U.S. military personnel. New positions in Afghanistan under consideration in the FY-09 supplemental request from all agencies would total 421. There are many more positions with separate funding mechanisms. Of the 421,

we will fill 56 by July 2009, 49 in the field and 7 in Kabul. The remaining 365, split between 224 in the field and 141 in Kabul, will arrive between August 2009 and March 2010, phased in coordination with arrival of military units and establishment of safer operating environments. The new civilians will join various State Department and USAID elements, the Department of Justice (DOJ) prosecutors and the FBI (Legal Attache), the Departments of Agriculture, Treasury, Homeland Security (DHS), Transportation (DOT), and Health and Human Services (HHS/CDC), as well as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

¶13. (SBU) In Kabul, the focus is on Afghans creating a merit-based, professional bureaucracy; and building its capacity to deliver services to the public. Strong ministries include Foreign Affairs, Defense, Public Health, Education, Finance, Communications, Rural Development, Counternarcotics, and the Afghan Central Bank. Interior, Agriculture and Finance stand out among ministries for strong leadership. We also work effectively with the other ministries, although mixed agendas or a legacy of weakness slow progress. For instance, the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice suffer from the acute lack of qualified professionals, a legal system that combines elements of Sharia, tribal, and Western law, and a lack of national consensus on the way forward.

¶14. (SBU) Outside Kabul, U.S. civilian and military efforts aim to strengthen local government at all levels, through Brigade Task Forces, PRTs, and (with the upcoming civilian increase) District Support Teams. We work with traditional leadership structures as well as those who gained power through force or wealth during the days of conflict, but who have proven ready to cooperate with constitutional government and rule of law. Lack of local consensus, traditionally weak connections between the capital and provinces, long-standing personal, ethnic, and tribal rivalries and distrust, and the presence of insurgents or criminals complicate our task. The goal is to support and help develop responsive, reliable leadership in local communities, reciprocally bound to the capital.

#### Little Momentum on Taliban reconciliation

¶15. (SBU) President Obama stated U.S. policy on reconciliation March 27: "There will be no peace without reconciliation among former enemies... That's why we will work with local leaders, the Afghan government, and international partners to have a reconciliation process in every province." Afghans broadly welcomed that U.S. policy. Nonetheless, reconciliation with Taliban or other insurgent leaders remains controversial. Many welcome the possibility of reduced violence and instability, while others (mainly non-Pashtuns, women, and certain civil society groups) fear an Intra-Pashtun deal could come at the expense of their interests. Although there are spikes of press stories from time to time about secret deals with the Quetta Shura and Hezb-i-Islami Gulbadin (HIG), the reality is no deal is imminent, and any talks are on the question of talks about talks. Certainly, nothing will be resolved before the election.

#### Economy

¶16. (SBU) Recovery in agricultural production, following

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severe drought in 2008, is expected to boost real economic growth to about nine percent in 2009-10. Inflation is declining due to lower food prices, and the Afghan currency is stable. The pre-election period is not especially conducive to implementing major economic reforms to support private sector development. That said, relatively young, dynamic and reformist ministers of Finance, Commerce and Agriculture are taking positive steps to improve the

business climate. Afghanistan's key economic challenge is to establish conditions for self-sustaining growth and strengthen fiscal sustainability so that it can reduce dependence on foreign aid over time. It remains one of the poorest countries in the world, and is facing spending increases that are further outpacing revenue year-over-year.

¶17. (SBU) In our economic assistance programs, the U.S. is gradually channeling more aid through the Afghan government, and urging other donors to do the same, while ensuring proper transparency and accountability. Our motto is: "Afghan leadership, Afghan capacity, Afghan sustainability."

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U.S. is also placing renewed emphasis in its assistance programs supporting agriculture, both as a basis for sustainable growth and to create licit economic alternatives to the insurgency and poppy cultivation. U.S. assistance will focus on agriculture programs that create jobs, develop roads and water systems supporting farm production and trade, and expand farm credit opportunities. To better link the center to the provinces, increased U.S. assistance will help bring provincial priorities into the national budget process. We are also encouraging greater Af-Pak cooperation, for example by supporting negotiations to update the decades-old agreement governing transshipment of Afghan agricultural and other exports across Pakistan to world markets.

#### Narcotics: Positive Trends, Challenge in the South

¶19. (SBU) The narcotics challenge continues in the south, where seven provinces now account for 98 percent of the country's opium, and narcotics trafficking and the insurgency have become mutually sustaining. We are increasing our focus on boosting licit agriculture, improving local governance, and increasing interdiction of drug traffickers to disrupt the link between narcotics trafficking and the insurgency. Poppy cultivation remains extensive, and costly eradication efforts can yield mixed results in COIN terms. Hence we are de-emphasizing eradication while increasing interdiction efforts and providing alternative rural livelihoods through agricultural development. Nevertheless, there is some promising news. Poppy cultivation dropped by 19 percent in 2008, the first reduction since 2005. Just as notably, poppy-free provinces grew from 13 to 18, or more than half of all provinces. Governors in three formerly major poppy cultivating provinces- Badakhshan, Balkh, and Nangarhar - have eliminated or nearly eliminated poppy cultivation. Poppy cultivation has died away by itself in other parts of the north and east of the country. This year, Helmand Governor Gulabuddin Mangal, whose province produces more than half of Afghanistan's opium poppy, conducted a comprehensive multi-season campaign against poppy cultivation in a 100-square mile area of central Helmand. Mangal's campaign combined public information, agricultural assistance, and law enforcement, including eradication by Afghan police with force protection from the Afghan army. The UN Office for Drugs and Crime believes poppy cultivation has dropped substantially in Helmand and predicts more poppy-free provinces in other parts of the country.

#### International Community and Afghanistan

¶20. (SBU) Relations between the government and the international community are uneven. The UN presence is strong; SRSG Kai Eide plays a key coordination role, but suffers from insufficient budgetary and personnel commitment from New York. President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and Special Representative Holbrooke have rallied world attention and increased resources for the Afghan-Pakistan complex of threats to regional stability. International support is holding as demonstrated at recent conferences, including the March 31 Hague Conference where more than 80 countries and international organizations reaffirmed their long-term commitment to Afghanistan and the April 2009 JCMB where donors committed to providing funding for an almost 5,000

member increase in the Kabul police force in time for August  
elections.  
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